Perceptions on Facebook and Ethnic relations during general elections in Kenya.

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Abstract:
With the growth of social media use among the youth in Kenya, many have taken to this platform to use it as a way to share information. Not much is known about the extent to which Facebook was used to fan Ethnicity during the 2017 General election period in Kenya. The study was carried out in Chuka University, Tharaka Nithi county, Kenya. Descriptive survey research design was used to carry out this study. Data collection was done using questionnaires. It was found that hateful messages were frequently shared on Facebook during the 2017 General elections in Kenya. It was also found that messages posted on Facebook negatively influenced ethnic relations in Kenya and to an extent contributed to election related violence. The study suggested that the Government of Kenya should ensure that laws against divisive messages and hate speech are clearly spelt out and publicized especially to the Facebook users
Key Words: "Facebook", "Ethnicity", "Ethnic Violence", "Hate Speech"

Introduction

Across the world, election processes have in recent years catalyzed conflict as political contestants mobilize extremist elements of populations to win office. Several African states have witnessed endemic violence in recent elections with widespread consequences and in the worst cases, state failure. There are several likely reasons for the frequent failure of African elections: having weak electoral commissions, inadequate judiciary and other institutions that can sustain democracy, but perhaps the main underlying cause is that no democratic means have been found to mediate the struggles over access to land and resources controlled by the state(De Smedt and Peters, 2009). The recent record of African elections with few exceptions have raised concerns that in ethnically divided societies, competitive electoral processes could undermine democracy by deepening the present divisions between winners and losers (Bardhan, 1997). Non- power wielding ethnic communities often feel excluded in the affairs of the state.

Dreyton (1995) in his book *Demystifying Tribalism,* suggests that the emergence of political pluralism has endangered the polarization of particularistic groupings as political parties crystallize, mostly on the basis of ethnic and regional interests rather than ideology or political principles. Election time ethno-regional conflicts in Kenya in 1992, 1997,2002, 2007 and 2013 all have one thing in common; the determination to control the spoils of office. Individuals sharing a common ethnicity are held together by a bond of ethnic capital which facilitates the distribution of resources which is key to the groups survival (Azam, 2001). Once a group takes over state power, it organizes itself and society in such a way as to perpetuate its control of power and use it to pursue its groups interests (Nnoli, 1989). Ethnicity is a resource in the hands of frivolous 'political entrepreneur' who,

because of corruption, mismanagement, and greed for power, manipulate ethnicity and use it to achieve personal agenda (Onyango, 2008). The perception by some groups that there are strong unequal opportunities and access to resources, as well as vast differences between groups, will contribute to a sense of grievance.

The way the Media processes, frames and passes on information either to the government or to the people affects the function of the political system. In the last decade, Kenya, has witnessed a massive expansion of Internet infrastructure and a mushrooming of digital technologies, all geared towards informing, entertaining and educating the citizenry. Mobile phones, the Internet and other digital avenues constitute an important outreach agent through which the public is sensitized on issues such as ethnicity, negative ethnicity and political ideologies. The numerous reports by national and international organizations that document the threatening atmosphere and ethnic violence before, during, and after the 2007 election all mention new media having fanned the flames of ethnic hatred, and the role of hate speech as a feature of the conflict (European Union (EU) 2008; Kenya National Commission of Human Rights (KNCHR) 2007- 2008). The distressing conclusion of many of the reports is that some instances of ethnic based violent behavior were likely motivated by encounters with hate speech in the form of text messages, e-mails and blogs (new media). This study sought to explore the extent to which posts shared on Facebook influenced ethnic relations during the 2017 general elections period in Kenya.

Research Objectives
The study sought to achieve the following objectives:
  i.   To explore the perceptions of Facebook users on the influence of Facebook posts on ethnic relations in Kenya during the 2017 general elections period.
  ii. To find out the extent to which Facebook contributed to fanning ethnic hatred in Kenya during the 2017 general election.

Methodology of the Study
Using the descriptive survey, this study intends to explore Facebook users' perceptions on the influence of Facebook posts on Ethnic relations in Kenya during the 2017 general elections. The study was conducted among students in Chuka University, Kenya. 158 students were selected to participate through simple random sampling. Questionnaires were used for data collection. Data was analyzed using percentages and frequencies and presented using tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
2.1 Demographic Information
Section one of the questionnaire required respondents to state their gender, age and indicate whether they accessed the internet through a Smart phone, Computer or Tablet and the results are reflected on Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 1
Respondents' Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage %
Males	82	51.9
Females	76	48.1

Male respondents made up 51.9 % while females made up 48.1% of the respondents. This shows that there was a slightly higher number of male respondents than females.

Table 2
Respondents' Age

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percentage %
Between 18- 25	102	64.6
Between 26-35	40	25.3
Above 36	16	10.1

Information on Table 2 shows that 64.6% of the respondents were aged between 18 and 25 while 25.3 % of the respondents were aged between 26 and 35. The remaining 10.1% were aged above 36 years of age.

Table 3
Medium through which internet is accessed

Gadget	Status	Frequency	Percentage %
Smart phone	Owns one	157	99.4
	Doesn't own	1	0.6
Computer	Owns one	40	24.1
	Doesn't own	118	75.9
Tablet	Owns one	14	8.9
	Doesn't own	144	91.5

99.4% of the respondents reported that they accessed the internet through the smart phone while 24.1% accessed the internet through a computer. Another 8.9% reported that they accessed the internet through a tablet.

2.2 Perceptions on Hate Speech on Facebook

Respondents were given five (5) statements which indicate hate speech. They were asked to indicate their opinion on the frequency with which each of the opinions was expressed on Facebook posts during the 2017 general elections period in Kenya. Table 4 presents the respondents responses

Table 4

Respondents' Opinion on Frequency of hateful messages

Nature of Message	Very Frequently Expressed %	Frequently Expressed %	No Opinion %	Not Frequently Expressed %	Not Expressed at all %
Posts with ethnically biased opinions	57.0	32.9	5.1	2.5	2.5
Incitement to vote against particular ethnic communities	39.2	31.6	12.7	11.4	5.1
Incitement to violent political action	16.5	29.1	17.7	21.5	13.9
Hateful messages directed towards candidates from particular ethnicities	46.9	31.6	7.6	10.1	3.8
Threatening messages	10.1	25.3	24.1	30.4	10.1

On posts with ethnically biased opinions, 57% of the respondents indicated that they were very frequently expressed while 32.9% rated them as frequently expressed. 2.5% of the respondents rated posts with ethnically biased opinions as not frequently expressed while another 2.5% of the respondents indicated that it was not expressed at all. An additional 5.1% of the respondents had no opinion. This shows that majority of the respondents consider posts with ethnically biased opinions as very frequently expressed on Facebook during the 2017 election period in Kenya.

On posts indicating Incitement of citizens to vote against particular ethnic communities, 39.2% of the respondents indicated that these were very frequently expressed while another 31.6% of the respondents rated them as frequently expressed. 11.4% indicated that they were not frequently expressed while another 5.1% rated them as not expressed at all while 12.7% had no opinion. This shows that majority of the respondents (39.2%) encountered posts indicating incitement of citizens to vote against contestants from particular ethnic communities on Facebook during the 2017 general elections period in Kenya.

Posts on Incitement to violent political action were rated as frequently expressed by 29.1% of the respondents. 21.5% of the respondents rated them as not frequently expressed while 16.5 % of the respondents indicated that they were very frequently expressed. An additional 13.9% of the respondents rated them as not expressed at while 17.7% of the respondents held no opinion on the frequency of posts on incitement to violent political action. This indicates that a good number of respondents (29.1%) rated posts on incitement to violent political action as frequently expressed on Facebook during the 2017 general elections period in Kenya.

'Hateful messages directed towards candidates from particular ethnicities' were rated as very frequently expressed by 46.9% of the respondents while 31.6% of the respondents rated it as frequently expressed. 10.1% of the respondents rated it as not frequently expressed while 3.8% of the respondents rated it as not expressed at all. Another 7.6% held no opinion on the same. This shows that majority of the respondents (46.9%) rated "hateful messages directed towards candidates from particular ethnicities" as very frequently expressed on Facebook during the 2017 general elections period in Kenya.

On posts with threatening messages, 25.3% of the respondents opined that they were frequently expressed while 10.1% of them were of the opinion that they were very frequently expressed. 10.1 % of the respondents indicated that posts with threatening messages were not expressed at all while 24.1% of the respondents had no opinion on this. This shows that a good number of respondents (25.3%) considered posts with threatening messages as frequently expressed on Facebook during the 2017 general elections period in Kenya.

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that messages posted on Facebook had negative influence on ethnic relations during the August 2017 general election period in Kenya. Table 5 shows the responses of the respondents on the level of their agreement with the statement.

Table 5

Messages Posted on Facebook Negatively Influenced Ethnic Relations

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly Agree	56	35.5
Agree	92	58.2
No Opinion	2	1.3
Disagree	8	5.1
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Total	158	100

The study established that 58.2% of the respondents agreed with the statement that messages posted on Facebook negatively influenced ethnic relation. 35.5 % of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement. 5.1 % of the respondents disagreed with statement while 1.3 % of the respondents had no opinion. This indicates that the majority of the respondents considered messages

posted on Facebook as having had a negative influence on ethnic relations in Kenya during the 2017 general elections period.

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that messages spread on Facebook contributed to election related violence in the period before and after the August 2017 general elections in Kenya. Table 6 shows the responses of the respondents on the level of their agreement with the statement.

Table 6
Messages posted on Facebook Contributed to Election related violence.

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly Agree	38	24.1
Agree	74	46.8
No Opinion	26	16.5
Disagree	20	12.7
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Total	158	100

The study established that 46.8% of the respondents rated messages posted on Facebook has having had a contribution on election related violence in Kenya during the 2017 general elections period. 24.1 % of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement. 12.7 % of the respondents disagreed with statement while 16.5 % of the respondents had no opinion. This shows that the majority of the respondents agreed with the statement that messages posted on Facebook contributed to election related violence during the general elections period in Kenya in 2017.

Respondents were given six (6) statements which describe attributes to national cohesion. They were asked to indicate their opinion on the frequency with which each of the opinions was expressed on social media posts. Table 7 presents the respondents responses

Table 7
Respondents' Opinion on the Frequency of posts on National cohesion

Message	Very Frequently Expressed %	Frequently Expressed %	No Opinion %	Not Frequently Expressed %	Not Expressed at all %
Posts that encourage respectful ethnic relations	24.1	25.3	5.1	40.5	5.1

Posts encouraging citizens to embrace Nationhood	15.2	32.9	7.6	40.5	3.8
Promotion of peaceful coexistence	35.4	29.1	3.8	30.4	1.3
Respect of other people's political choices	17.7	27.8	7.6	34.2	12.7
Discouraging negative ethnicity	27.8	22.8	7.6	34.2	12.7
Promoting national ideals	17.7	29.1	11.4	35.5	6.3

On posts that encourage respectful ethnic relations, 40.5% of the respondents indicated that they were not frequently expressed 25.3% rated them as frequently expressed. 24.1% of the respondents rated posts that encourage respectful ethnic relations as very frequently expressed while 5.1% of the respondents indicated that it was not expressed at all. An additional 5.1% of the respondents had no opinion. This shows that majority of the respondents (40.5%) rated posts that encourage respectful ethnic relations as not frequently expressed on Facebook during the 2017 general elections period.

Posts encouraging citizens to embrace nationhood were rated as not frequently expressed by 40.5% of the respondents indicated while another 32.9% of the respondents rated them as frequently expressed. 15.2 % indicated that they were very frequently expressed while another 3.8% rated them as not expressed at all while 7.6% had no opinion. This indicates that majority of the respondents (40.5%) rated posts encouraging citizens to embrace nationhood as not frequently expressed.

Posts on promotion of peaceful coexistence were rated as very frequently expressed by 35.4% of the respondents. 30.4% of the respondents rated them as not frequently expressed while 29.1 % of the respondents indicated that they were frequently expressed. An additional 3.8% of the respondents held no opinion on the frequency of posts promoting peaceful existence 1.3 % of the respondents rated them as not expressed at all. Majority of the respondents rated posts promoting peaceful coexistence among citizens as very frequently expressed.

'Respect of other people's political choices' was rated as not frequently expressed by 34.2% of the respondents while 27.8% of the respondents rated it as frequently expressed. 17.7% of the respondents rated it as very frequently expressed while 12.7% of the respondents rated it as not expressed at all. Another 7.6% held no opinion on the same. This shows that a good number of respondents (34.2%) rated posts encouraging respect for other people's choices as not frequently expressed.

On posts discouraging negative ethnicity, 39.3% of the respondents opined that they were not frequently expressed while 27.8% of them were of the opinion that they were very frequently expressed. 22.8 % of the respondents indicated that posts discouraging negative ethnicity were frequently expressed while 7.6 % of the respondents had no opinion. Another 2.5% opined that these were not expressed at all. This indicates that majority of the respondents rated posts discouraging negative ethnicity as not frequently expressed.

 'Posts promoting national ideals' were rated by 35.5 % of the respondents as not frequently expressed while 29.1 % of the respondents rated them as frequently expressed. 17.7% of the respondents rated posts promoting national ideals as very frequently expressed while another 6.3 % of the respondents indicated that they are not expressed at all. 11.4% of the respondents and no opinion on the same. A good number of respondents (35.5 %) rated posts promoting national ideals as not frequently expressed.

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that Kenyans are generally aware of any rules and regulations governing use of social media with regard to national cohesion and hate speech. Table 8 shows the responses of the respondents on the level of their agreement with the statement.

Table 8

Kenyans awareness of rules governing social media hate speech and national cohesion.

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly Agree	19	12.0
Agree	84	53.2
No Opinion	8	5.1
Disagree	30	18.9
Strongly Disagree	17	10.8
Total	158	100.0

 The study established that the majority of the respondents agreed with the statement at 53.2%. 18.9 % of the respondents disagree with the statement. 12 % of the respondents strongly agreed with statement while 10.8 % of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. Another 5.1% had no opinion.

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that Kenyan authorities were doing enough to control spread of messages that threaten national cohesion on social media. Table 9 shows the responses of the respondents on the level of their agreement with the statement.

Table 9

Kenyan authorities are making efforts to control divisive messages.

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly Agree	20	12.7
Agree	32	20.3
No Opinion	6	3.8
Disagree	77	48.7
Strongly Disagree	23	14.6
Total	158	100

The study established that the majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement at 48.7%. 20.3 % of the respondents agreed with the statement. 14.6 % of the respondents strongly disagreed with statement that Kenyan authorities were doing enough to control spread of messages that threaten national cohesion while 3.8 % of the respondents had no opinion.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study the following conclusions are drawn:
1. That hateful messages were frequently shared on Facebook during the 2017 general elections in Kenya.
2. That messages posted on Facebook negatively influenced ethnic relations in Kenya.
3. That messages encouraging national cohesion were not frequently posted on Facebook during the 2017 general elections period in Kenya.
4. That Kenyan authorities are not doing enough to control the spread of messages that threaten national cohesion on Facebook.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are necessary in light of the responses from the respondents and in view of the research findings:
1. The government of Kenya should ensure that laws against divisive messages and hate speech are clearly spelt out and publicized especially to the Facebook users
2. To many Kenyan users, Facebook is a "safe avenue" for incitement and for spreading ethnic political propaganda since the law has not been keen on online offences. Action should be taken so that a message can cut across all users and discourage repeat of such behavior in future.
3. Law enforcement agencies should be taken through social media training to learn how to operate online tools so that monitoring of social media/ Facebook crime is easier. The police will in this way be able to collect evidence for crimes committed from Facebook posts by for example taking screenshots of Facebook posts so that evidence is available even after users have deleted messages.
4. Government agencies like the National Cohesion commission should invest more in creating awareness on the dangers of spreading hateful messages on social media sites such as Facebook.

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